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ABSTRACT

A preventive program in the area of identity formation, offered in the form of two-credit academic courses, is presented. A theoretical framework, based on the work of Marcia and his collaborators, delineates four identity "statuses" based on whether the individual has considered various alternatives and then made a commitment to a particular alternative in substantive areas such as religion, politics, and occupational choice. A wide variety of formats used to facilitate students' self-exploration includes role-playing, data gathering from the family of origin, interpersonal feedback, guest speakers, open-ended group discussion, the keeping of diaries, and the writing of personal book reports. The role of the instructor is non-traditional in a variety of ways. The long-range plan for the program involves training participants in group facilitation so that they can subsequently lead identity formation groups comprised of fellow students. The difficulties involved in evaluating programs of this sort are noted. (Author)

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IDENTITY FORMATION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A PREVENTIVE PROGRAM

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The area of adult development has begun to receive considerable attention in both the professional and lay literature. Erik Erikson (1950[1], 1968[2]) is universally acknowledged to be the pioneer in this area, but for many years he stood alone in his portrayal of the entire life cycle as an unfolding series of developmental stages. Lately, however, a number of authors have sought to extend Erikson's work by more fully describing the various stages which characterize the human life cycle (Sheehy, 1974[3]; Levinson, 1978[4]; Gould, 1978[5]).

The consensually held view among those who have written about adult development is that the crucial developmental task for late adolescents is the formation of a sense of identity. What is most important in this process is that individuals separate and individuate from their family of origin so that the identity adopted is as independently arrived at as possible. Though one can never be totally independent of familial influence, there are clearly meaningful differences in the degree to which individuals manage to move in this direction. Thus the task is to separate as much as possible from the identity defined by the powerful influences in one's early life, almost always parents or parent-surrogates, in order to be able to make as free a choice as possible about the different dimensions of one's "identity".

Building on this basic conceptual framework, James Marcia and his graduate students and other collaborators (1966[6], 1967[7], 1970[8], 1976[9]) have operationalized the construct of identity and have produced the bulk of the empirical work in this area. Marcia breaks down the construct of "identity" into two component parts: occupation and ideology. The area of ideology is further broken

down into the sub-areas of religion and politics.

Marcia (1966[6]) asserts, and demonstrates empirically, that individuals can be categorized as falling into one of four identity statuses. Though he talks primarily about overall identity status, his data make it evident that the same individual can fall into different identity statuses in the different sub-categories that constitute the overall construct. The program to be described is based on the notion that individuals fall into one of four identity statuses in each content area.

The definitions of the four statuses are based on the following two terms:

"Crisis" - a serious consideration of alternatives (thus defined quite differently from what is typically understood by the word "crisis")

"Commitment" - relatively firm choice of a particular alternative

On the basis of these definitions, the four identity statuses are defined as follows:

Achieved - past crisis and current commitment

Moratorium - current crisis (which may or may not result in commitment)

Foreclosed - current commitment without preceding crisis

Diffused - past crisis and no current commitment or no past crisis and no current commitment

In formulating the goals of the program to be described, it was understood from the outset that these would vary depending on the status in which the individual began in the particular content area in question. The goals for each identity status were

conceptualized as follows:

Achieved - strengthening and solidification

Moratorium - movement toward resolution of crisis in direction of commitment

Foreclosed - re-opening of question of commitment and encouragement of serious consideration of alternatives (with no preference as to whether the eventual recommitment was the same as, or different from, the original commitment)

Diffused - movement into crisis and toward commitment

The program has been offered for two consecutive academic years. A total of 15 students enrolled the first year. The program was conceived from the outset as an experiential seminar in which students would be encouraged to explore their own process of identity formation as it was unfolding in their current lives. In addition to the three substantive areas which were suggested by Marcia's work (occupational choice, religious beliefs and political beliefs), it was decided to add three other content areas for exploration:

1) Sex role
2) Personal characteristics - e.g., decisiveness, dependency
3) Interpersonal valuing - how important interpersonal relationships were to the individual as compared with other potential sources of gratification in their lives

All three of these areas were added because of their face-valid relevance for a college-age population.

A wide variety of formats was used to facilitate the students' exploration of these six content areas. Though the format differed,

sometimes substantially, from week to week, the goal always remained the same: to help the students think and talk about themselves and how they had become what they were, as well as to consider how they wanted to develop in the future and what they might do to bring about their desired ends. Thus the focus was on self-awareness, but in addition there was an attempt to expand students' definitions of what they saw as possible for themselves. In this respect the group context was ideal, since students' sharing with each other their different histories, as well as wishes for the future, served to help them explore their own assumptions, as well as to see more clearly the wide variety of options that were available to them.

The following were the kinds of activities engaged in during the weekly group meetings:

1) Role-playing - Role-playing situations were aimed at stimulating exploration of issues which were salient for the students. For instance, one role-play involved a female student bringing home to her parents and siblings the man she had become seriously involved with, who was of another religion. Another situation involved a family dealing with a son who had just been rejected by the last medical school that was still considering his application. Student volunteers were given a brief description of the situation and mental set of the characters they were playing and, after playing the roles out, the entire group discussed how it might be for them if the situation arose in their families.

2) Data gathering from family of origin - Students were instructed to learn from their parents things that many people never bother to learn. An example of this was the assignment to

inquire about the role that interpersonal relationships played in the early years of their same-sex parent's life. The purpose was to help students achieve some appreciation of how they might have been influenced in the choices they had made by the experiences of their parents. These assignments were indicative of an important theme which pervaded the course: namely, that in order to separate one must confront just how much one has been, and continues to be, influenced by experiences in the family of origin. The extent of such influence is something many students, and sometimes mental health professionals, are resistant to acknowledging (Babineau, 1975[10]).

3) Interpersonal feedback - After some period of time elapsed, time was set aside periodically for students to share their impressions of each other. At times the group was broken down into sub-groups of four, and students were asked to write down descriptive phrases about themselves and each of the other members of their sub-group, and then to distribute what they had written to the person in question. At other times students were given a dichotomy such as "warm and nourishing" vs. "cold and ungiving," or "powerfulness, authority and leadership" vs. "powerlessness and followership," and asked to place themselves in a lineup with the other students on the basis of how they had conducted themselves during the weekly class meetings. After the initial lineup was complete, students were permitted to move any other students, or themselves, to the place in the lineup which they believed more accurately reflected where the individual(s) in question belonged. After everyone had made the alterations they wanted to make, time was set aside to debrief about peoples'

reactions to the feedback received.

4) Guests - Occasionally outside guests were invited to come to the seminar and share the evolution they had experienced in a particular content area. Guests were chosen on the basis of how interesting and relevant their developmental histories were, as well as on their willingness to talk openly about themselves. It was hoped that exposure to such individuals would expand students' awareness of the wide variety of courses of development that were possible in each content area.

5) Group discussion - The greatest amount of class time was spent in open-ended class discussion. Topics were chosen for their face-valid relevance to the identity struggles in which the students were currently engaged. Topics discussed included sexual performance, what people believed about the existence of a Supreme Being, and the importance of money and status in peoples' thinking about occupational choice.

In addition to these kinds of activities during the regularly scheduled class times, there were two other activities that were important aspects of the course:

1) Diaries - Students were required to keep diaries. They were instructed to write down any and all thoughts, feelings, or experiences that seemed related to the process of identity formation they were experiencing. Occasionally these diaries were collected and read by the instructor, partly to check that students were keeping them conscientiously and partly so that non-evaluative comments about what was written could be made.

2) Papers - Students were also requested to periodically write short reviews of books relevant to the different areas focused

on during seminar time. A variety of books were suggested in each of the content areas explored. Students were specifically instructed that book reviews were not to be of the traditional sort, but rather were to primarily focus on the personal thoughts and feelings about self that were touched off while reading the book being reviewed.

The role of the instructor in this kind of academic offering is quite different from the traditional instructor's role. For one thing, every possible attempt is made to minimize the evaluative dimension of the role. The courses themselves have been graded on a Pass-Fail basis, with the only criteria for passing being regular attendance, some degree of class participation, keeping the diary, and turning in the book reviews. Grades have not been given for any of the material turned in, though a great deal of descriptive feedback is given on all written work. Occasionally a student turns in a very poor book review; in these instances students are required to rewrite the review. Though no procedures can eliminate the evaluative dimension of the relationship between an instructor and a group of students, the structure employed is aimed at minimizing this dimension of the relationship.

The second major departure in the instructor role is the high degree of self-disclosure required. Because college professors have progressed through much more of the life cycle than their students, and have managed to do so with at least some manifest success, they are powerful role models for students; thus, an instructor's willingness to self-disclose can do a great deal to facilitate group participation. An instructor's descriptions of

personal struggles, both past and present, can operate to give students permission to acknowledge to themselves and others that they are struggling too. Such self-disclosure by an instructor can be crucial in bringing about the kind of discussion that is necessary for such a course to have meaningful impact.

"Grand Design"

The long-range plan, or "grand design", for this program encompasses two different stages, only the first of which has been addressed thus far. The first goal is to be able to demonstrate that participating students' identity formations can be influenced in desirable ways by experiential courses such as the one that has been described. The second goal is to build into the program some training in group facilitation and leadership, so that participants can, at its conclusion, work with groups of fellow students to help facilitate their identity formations.

A beginning effort in this direction was made during the second semester of the first year of the program. The students, who had spent the first semester exploring the six content areas already described, were given six weeks of group leadership training and then conducted discussion groups for the next six weeks (with weekly group supervisory sessions) with students enrolled in another psychology course. This gave them one week to cover each of the six content areas. It became clear very quickly that the time available was not adequate to delve into these content areas, and that six weeks was not a sufficient amount of time to train undergraduates to be effective group leaders. Thus far no further efforts have been made to pursue this second goal.

Evaluation and Second Year's Program

Pre-post evaluation of the first semester of the program did not yield definitive evidence of the course's efficacy. There are a number of possible explanations for this, the two foremost being that three months is much too short a period of time for people to change significantly in the areas being investigated, and that the number of experimental and control subjects was quite small. It is clear that future research will have to employ a longitudinal approach in which subjects are tested at a number of different points in time, some of them years after the course has concluded, in order to be able to assess whether the course impacts participants' development.

On the basis of the lack of positive findings the first year, two basic changes were adopted for the second year of the program. First, the number of areas explored was reduced from six to three. The areas that were retained for exploration were those which seemed to command the greatest group cathexis during the first year: namely, occupational choice, religion, and sex role. Second, instead of devoting only one semester to the exploration of these areas, it was decided to devote the full academic year to them. The kind of longitudinal research design which is necessary to demonstrate the program's efficacy has not yet been feasible, but will hopefully be employed in future years.

Future Plans

One hope for the future is to demonstrate empirically that the experiential program has a salutary effect on participants' growth and development. In addition, it is hoped that the second prong of the "grand design" can eventually be resurrected. There

are substantial difficulties associated with this goal, including devising ways to integrate group leadership training into the identity formation work, as well as finding ways to get groups of students willing to work for sufficient periods of time with non-professional group leaders. However, if these difficulties can be surmounted, the package has the potential for being a substantial preventive mental health program. The first part of the program alone may very well be worthwhile, but it is not particularly efficient in terms of professional time invested. If the students who work directly with the professor who conducts the course can be prepared to, in turn, work effectively with others (with ongoing supervision), then the program could affect substantial numbers of students and constitute a significant prevention program that can be an important part of the college mental health worker's armamentarium.

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